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ABSTRACT

Three specific points are made about helping program managers improve their use of information: (1) program managers appear to be the easiest group for evaluators to work with to improve use; (2) realistically, these managers may be the most difficult group to help; and (3) several strategies exist that evaluators use to help program people improve their use of information. During the course of his study, the author found several areas to be of concern to program managers. These areas include meeting program requirements, dealing with a lack of authority to meet program responsibilities, maintaining funding levels, and improving the program. These concerns are best alleviated through use of the following strategies: pressing for district policies requiring managerial response to evaluations; streamlining fulfillment of required evaluations; highlighting the use of findings for program promotion; forewarning managers about adverse findings; encouraging institutionalization of information use; and helping managers recognize patterns in tests and evaluations that point out strengths and weaknesses. (Author/GK)

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HOW EVALUATORS CAN HELP PROGRAM MANAGERS IMPROVE THEIR USE OF INFORMATION FROM TESTS AND EVALUATIONS

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In this paper, I wish to make three general points about helping program managers improve their use of information:

- Program managers would appear to be the easiest group for evaluators to work with to improve use.
- Ironically, however, these managers may be the most difficult group to help.
- Still, during our field work we found several strategies that evaluators use to help program people improve their use of information.

Before expanding on these points, it might be helpful to explain whom I am classifying as program managers. In general, I am including managers of categorical programs (such as Title I directors), curriculum coordinators (such as directors of reading and science programs), and managers of special programs (such as managers of special education and vocational education).

This is a diverse set of potential users of information. Some managers oversee programs that serve all children; others supervise programs serving select groups. Some receive all their funds from the federal government; others receive mostly local funds. Some managers--such as those heading mathematics and science programs--have well-defined academic focuses; others--such as directors of Follow Through programs--supervise diverse services.

Evaluators and Program Managers as Partners in Information Use

We turn now to the first point of the paper: Program directors appear to be the easiest group for evaluators to serve. This seems to be true for several reasons. First, evaluators and program managers share similar organizational locations. Both are usually middle management, are often located in central offices, and are assigned staff, rather than line, roles. Thus evaluators and

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program managers would appear to be organizational peers. With program managers, evaluators face neither the problem of giving advice to people who are their bosses nor the problem of the downtown versus school split, which can complicate working with principals and teachers.

Moreover, evaluation has grown in schools in part as a result of the growth of programs--especially federal programs.* As districts have taken on more services for special groups--such as limited-English speaking children and the handicapped--evaluation requirements for such services have led many districts to establish or enlarge evaluation offices. Thus evaluators were cutting their teeth on evaluations at about the same time that many program directors were beginning in their fields. Again, a reason for sympathetic working relationships.

Not only did evaluation grow up with programs, but evaluators often are paid solely or partially from program funds. And much of what evaluators do is generated by program requirements. For example, one district we visited produced roughly 60 evaluation and testing reports for the 1979-80 school year. The titles of these reports reveal that 28 (or about 50%) directly resulted from federal, state, or local program mandates. (Most of the others dealt with district-wide testing or were papers delivered at conferences.) Thus evaluators and program managers would seem to share a common interest in using information--evaluators because they produce so much information for programs, and managers because their programs often pay for a large share of the district's evaluation activities.

Difficulties in Serving Managers

Despite these several reasons for working together, evaluators may find program managers the hardest group to help use information. One reason for this is that use is much more likely to occur when information is linked to

* Lyon, Doscher, McGranahan, & Williams (1978) found that 28% of the school districts surveyed reported that their evaluation offices were established in direct response to federal or state requirements.

the user's concerns and problems (see Cox, 1977, and Apling & Kennedy, 1981, for further discussion of this point), but many concerns of program managers are not particularly amenable to solutions based on testing and evaluation findings. During the first year of our study (Kennedy, Apling, & Neumann, 1980), we found four pervasive concerns among the managers we interviewed:

- meeting program requirements,
- dealing with the lack of authority to meet program responsibilities,
- maintaining funding levels, and
- improving the program.

Meeting requirements--the first concern--often involves performing program evaluations. But meeting requirements for evaluations does not necessarily lead to use and can, in some instances, discourage use. These evaluations are often required by outside sources such as funding agencies and often are aimed at questions that program people already can answer or think they can answer--such as whether the program is effective. (We had many program managers tell us that "I know the program works--it's others we have to convince.") In the worst case, the program people see externally imposed evaluations as just more forms to be filled out. As one Career Education coordinator told us, "Evaluation? It [is] just one more form." The less they have to do with this information the better. We interviewed program people in one state who hire outside evaluators to conduct required evaluations for them and to fill out the forms. Thus the program people never had to "get their hands dirty" with the evaluation information, and use of this information was most unlikely.

The second concern--lack of authority--was voiced often. Program managers are charged to maintain and improve their programs but often feel they lack the authority to meet these responsibilities. For example, an evaluation in one district we visited indicated that most teachers taught reading poorly. The evaluation led the reading director to recommend massive inservice help, especially

for junior high teachers, who were found to be the most deficient. But no action was taken. The training was blocked by insufficient funds and by strong opposition from principals and teachers. It is difficult to imagine how information from tests and evaluations could increase the authority of the program people at this site, since this was mainly a political and organizational problem.

The third concern--maintaining funding levels--can be addressed, in part, with information from tests and evaluations. For example, evaluations showing program success can be used to convince decision makers within or outside the school district that the program should be maintained. However, we did not find many examples of such decisions. Oftentimes a program continues if funds for that program remain available. If funding runs out, the program is ended, regardless of its merits.

Of course decisions about which programs to keep and which to jettison are likely to become more numerous as federal program money is cut and as tax-cutting measures such as Proposition $2\frac{1}{2}$ in Massachusetts go into effect. But even when such decisions are made, evaluation results may not be that useful to program managers. For example, one district we visited had just decided to replace some federal money for bilingual programs with local money because federal funds were running out. A sophisticated evaluation was timed to be available when the decision was made. Despite the positive results of the evaluation, both the evaluators and program people told us that the decision in favor of bilingual education was due more to strong support from interest groups than to evaluation findings.

The final concern--improving programs--also can be addressed with information from tests and evaluations. But many times program managers never get around to this concern because they are continually worried about requirements, authority, and funding. Moreover, evaluators may be so tied up with meeting evaluation and testing requirements that they too have little time to provide information for

program improvement. And the evaluations that are required often end up being summative evaluations of the programs, which provide little information about how to improve them.

Another problem in helping program managers use information is the influence of their own informal information,* that is, their store of knowledge about the people with whom they work, the activities occurring in their classrooms, and the rules and goals of their programs. Unless a district is exceptionally large, program directors have considerable direct access to their programs. They know the principals and teachers, discuss the program with them, and often observe classrooms. We found that these interactions were important sources of information about the program. Professional knowledge of this sort often reduces the perceived need for systematic data. One director said, "My staff is so intimate with the teachers and have been working with them for so long that any complaints that they have I'm sure are all freely spoken. We don't need to use interviews or pencil and paper instruments in order to find out how the programs could be strengthened. That comes up in the course of normal conversations." And sometimes, professional knowledge even diminished people's faith in systematic data. The director of federal programs in a district with a highly respected evaluation unit recounted why he sometimes did not use evaluation and research. "As a decision maker there are a number of options available to me: my own opinion, the opinion of experts, and our own formal and informal data bases." He pointed out that "both the experts and I are fallible."

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* Several authors have discussed the importance of informal information. Lindblom and Cohen (1979), in their examination of social science knowledge vs. "ordinary knowledge," argue that, because social problems are so complex, the authority of social science data probably depends for confirmation on ordinary knowledge, rather than solely on the scientific merit of the data. Mintzberg (1975) maintains that managers rely less on formal information from management systems, and more on "'soft' information, especially gossip, hearsay, and speculation" (p. 52). Weiss (1980) found that social science was "one source among many, and not usually powerful enough to drive the decision process. [Administrators] read social science research, but it was auxiliary to their own firsthand experience" (p. 390).

Helping Program Managers Improve Use

Despite the difficulties in helping program managers improve their use of information, our field work indicated several tactics for improving the usefulness of tests and evaluations for program people. In the districts we visited, evaluators were struggling to serve program managers and other clients. They had come up with several successful efforts and had plans or hopes for additional approaches in the future.

In two districts we visited, evaluators used a "stick" to encourage use; namely, policies were adopted requiring program managers and others to react to evaluation results. The evaluators in one of these districts had convinced the school board to adopt a policy specifying that all evaluation reports were public information. The evaluators felt that this gave them useful leverage in getting clients to act on evaluation reports. "It's been a wonderful club," one evaluator told us with a smile. The other district had a policy requiring program directors to respond in writing to evaluation reports. Whether they agreed or disagreed with the findings, they had to say what changes they intended to make in response to a report. Although such policies may not guarantee the use of information, they do ensure that the information will not be ignored.

We also saw more "carrot-like" approaches. A set of such approaches involves linking information to program managers' concerns. I have already documented how difficult this is to do, but evaluators we talked with were attempting it nonetheless. One concern--meeting regulations--sometimes was addressed by doing less, rather than more. In situations where required evaluations are not particularly useful at the local level, some evaluators sought to routinize the procedures to provide more time for producing more useful information. The Title I evaluation models might provide an opportunity for saving time and other resources. The district can choose one of three models, which is used

year after year. Data collection, analysis, and reporting could be streamlined as experience with the model grows. Some school districts already buy some of these services from test companies and outside evaluators. In one district, the Title I evaluator told us that McGraw-Hill not only scored their tests, "but [they] match the students too. . . . At the end we contract for pre-post match by project, grade, even teacher. We get the whole thing right down to a t-test." Of course, if an important local decision about the program is coming up--such as whether to change from a pull out to an after school program--a more thorough evaluation would be planned. But when major decisions are not likely, some evaluators are opting to spend less time on required summative evaluations, paying more attention to local information needs.

As I mentioned earlier, information from tests and evaluations plays a relatively small role in program managers' concerns about authority and funding, because these are chiefly political issues. Moreover, evaluators are often reluctant to choose sides in political tussles. But there are ways which evaluators point out to program directors how a particular finding might be useful in a struggle for program survival. For example, an evaluator told us--and presumably told the program people--that relatively small positive results of the effectiveness of a program could be used to argue for more money. He implied that program people could argue that the program would become more effective if more resources were allocated to it.

Another way evaluators help program managers in the political arena is not to spring unfavorable evaluation findings on program staff. As it becomes clear that evaluation findings may be negative, the program director and administrators may be informed informally or through a memo. They then know what to expect in the report and can make necessary corrective changes, or at least show that they have started to do so by the time the report is released. In three of the districts we visited, evaluators made it a

practice to send the evaluation report to program directors to check for errors before anyone else saw it, thus giving them time to respond, request clarification of certain issues, or even attach a formal rejoinder if they wished.

In the longer term, some evaluators were influencing the actual decision-making process by helping to institutionalize decision-making strategies incorporating data from tests and evaluations. Of course, such changes depend a great deal on the predispositions of the superintendent, school board members, and the community, but evaluators sometimes helped in this process by trying to make all parties more knowledgeable about tests and evaluations and by serving as referees to make sure that information was not distorted in political debates. By helping program managers and other actors to become more knowledgeable about tests and measures, evaluators gave people more confidence to use information to argue their own cases and to challenge the data of others.

Some examples of institutionalized practices may help clarify what we mean. One large suburban district could be said to have a forensic decision-making process. The board debated a vast range of policy, programmatic, and instructional issues. In addition, the community was very active in these discussions, often testifying before the board or sitting on committees as well as attending parent meetings. People freely expressed and argued their value judgments and discussed the meaning of empirical data. Even parents knew that they could not present their case without some evidence to substantiate it; the atmosphere was such that every member of decision-making groups used--and often heavily relied upon--data. Another example is a large urban school district that heavily emphasized the use of test scores, not only for monitoring instruction but also for setting classroom and building-level goals. The monitoring system had existed for several years, and people in many different

occupational positions looked at the test data in very similar ways, used the same vocabulary to describe it, and discussed its significance from the same perspective. The point here is simply that some districts conveyed a coherent attitude toward systematic information, a consistent point of view on its relevance and appropriateness, and a recognized method for incorporating it into decisions. By thus facilitating the institutionalization of information use, evaluators influence how program managers think about their programs and how they promote their programs in the political arena.

Besides helping match information to concerns about requirements, authority, and funding, evaluators we interviewed help program managers use information by linking it to efforts to improve programs. We saw relatively few examples of such efforts. What predominated in what we saw were attempts to identify program strengths and weaknesses and to track problems by collecting and examining patterns in tests and observational information. One example of links between informational patterns and identifying needed improvements involved the close working relationship of the Title I director in a small New England town and her outside evaluator. The director described their relationship as follows:

> Sometimes I say what my hunches are and he tries to validate them or refine my ideas. . . . He tracks ongoing problems as well as addressing new ones. Last year he spent a lot of time in one building with one problem--that problem is still there, incidentally--but he also tries to help me think through alternatives.

Another program director told us how she works with her evaluator to spot needed improvements:

> We [the director and the evaluator] look for trends and . . . proble areas. . . . We have pinpointed the grades with the most problems and now we are asking ourselves: are they the grades with the newest personnel, or the highest turnover? We are trying to determine exactly why the low scores are there. [The evaluator] doesn't just do what I say I need. She tells me what she thinks. . . . She has interviewed pupils and teachers and principals and vice principals. What we are trying to find out is just where help exists and how to get it to the staff.

Because relationships such as these are far more intense than most evaluators have the time to develop, we found few of them in our sample. Program directors without access to evaluators as personal consultants tended to rely on their own staffs for similar assistance. Such interactive problem-solving was probably necessary for program directors who had to balance their program improvement strategies with other such considerations.

In addition to providing sticks and carrots, evaluators seeking to help program managers improve their information use must come to grips with a basic conflict in their role: the conflict of being an objective judge of the program and, at the same time, working intimately with program people to improve use. As we argue elsewhere (Apling & Kennedy, 1981), close, long-term involvement with users is necessary to help improve use. But such involvement leads some to question the evaluator's objectivity and independence. As one evaluator put it,

> When you have had [evaluators] attached to a program staff, they don't have enough clout to stand up to the program director, and they often become administrative assistants. You lost the ability to stand up and give your feelings.

At the same time this evaluator saw the need to be close to program people and believed that some members of the evaluation staff should be housed "in the field" to be more directly helpful to users.

In part this conflict can be defused by deciding whether evaluators should provide information about programs for policy makers or for program managers. If summative evaluations are needed for policy makers to decide which programs to keep and which to curtail, objectivity is paramount. But objectivity or appearances of objectivity may be less important if the aim is to provide program managers with information to improve programs. In the latter instance, close involvement with the program and its personnel may overshadow the need for objective judgment.

In districts where objectivity and independence were the main concerns,

evaluators were often physically separate from the programs they evaluated. In addition, directors of evaluation rotated their staffs periodically so they would not become identified with or attached to the programs they evaluated. Where involvement was more important, evaluators tried to house their staff near the people they evaluated and permanently assigned people to specific programs.

Summary

I have argued in this paper that, although program managers may seem to be the easiest group for evaluators to serve, they may be the hardest to help use information. Despite these difficulties, we found evaluators using several strategies to help program managers use information from tests and evaluations. These include:

- Pressing for district policies that require managers to respond to evaluations.
- Streamlining the fulfillment of required evaluations and testing programs.
- Pointing out to program people how findings can be used to promote their programs.
- Forewarning managers about adverse findings.
- Encouraging the institutionalization of information use.
- Helping managers spot patterns in tests and evaluations that point to program strengths and weaknesses.

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